

Circular letter by
Samuel R. and Miers Fisher.
Philadelphia 1793

843 PHILADELPHIA. Circular Letter (2 pp. folio) sent out by Samuel R. and Miers Fisher to their correspondents, dated Philadelphia 11th Month, 18th, 1793, giving a graphic account of the yellow fever epidemic then prevalent, with especial mention of the humane services of "Stephen Girard, a French merchant, and Peter Helm, born here of German parents," etc.

RESPECTED FRIEND

AS our correspondence with most of our friends, both at home and abroad, has been interrupted on our part, for nearly three months past, it is proper that we should account to them for so extraordinary a suspension, and give some account of our late and present situation.

Our *S. R. F.* had been absent most part of the spring and summer, on a matrimonial engagement; before his return, on the 3d of the 8th month, our valued friend and brother-in-law *Samuel Lewis* was taken ill, and expired in great pain in the course of a few hours; this occasioned a temporary suspension of our business: our *S. R. F.* returned on the 10th, and before we had got into our usual train, it was discovered, that a pestilential fever was raging in the north-east parts of the city.—The college of physicians met to deliberate on it, and published their opinion and advice on the subject; part of which was a precaution, generally understood to be the same, used in the east (and which we know from history was used in London) in times when the plague rages; that is, that every house, wherein a sick person was, should be marked, to prevent others from entering.—This was sufficient to alarm the inhabitants, and excite terror; a great variety of quack preventatives were offered to the public, and some placed confidence in them.—The disorder however quickly spread to other parts of the city, and threatened to become general: it was so mortal in the beginning, that few survived the third and fifth, and it could not be ascertained for some time, whether any person had survived the eighth day; to be taken, was considered nearly the same as to be dead: hence there was a general abandoning of the sick to the care of blacks, who were supposed not liable to the infection.—The nearest connexions, with some exceptions, would not visit the chambers of their sick friends. The physicians differed about the mode of treating the disorder, and published opposite systems; many of them were taken sick, and it became difficult to procure a visit; many were left to their own opinions, and adopted the mode published by the physician that stood highest in their esteem, and many perished without any aid at all.—In this situation a great part of the inhabitants fled to the country in every direction; of these, some were taken with the disorder and died; but we have heard no instance of any person, who had previously resided in the country, taking the infection from them. Some few from an apprehension of duty, more for the security of their property, and yet more, because they had not the means of removal, or a place to remove to, staid in the city; and it is computed that above one third of the whole number of inhabitants went away.—Those who staid, were cautious how they went about the streets, so that the city appeared in a degree to be depopulated; business of almost every kind was suspended, inward bound ships came to at the villages down the river, and for nearly two months our streets were deserted by all, but a few sorrowful persons walking, as with their hands on their loins, about the necessary concerns of the sick, and hearses conducted by negroes, mostly without followers to and from the different grave yards.—A number of citizens however, with a courage that will always do them honour, formed themselves into a committee headed by the mayor; borrowed money upon the credit of future subscriptions; established an hospital, about a mile from town, for the poor; procured carriages to convey the sick to it; sat daily at the City-hall, to receive applications and administer relief; and two of them, *Stephen Girard*, a French merchant, long resident here, and *Peter Helm*, born here of German parents, men whose names and services should never be forgot, had the humanity and courage constantly to attend the hospital, and not only saw that the nurses did their duties, but they actually performed many of the most dangerous, and at the same time humiliating services, for the sick, with their own hands; these gentlemen are mercifully preserved alive and well, though four of the committee, who sat at the City-hall, took the disorder, and died—their names were *Daniel Offley*, *Joseph Inskeep*, *Jonathan D. Sergeant*, and *Andrew Aldgate*. The mortality was greatest in proportion to the number of the sick, in the beginning; but as they increased, although the number of deaths increased to a terrifying degree, so as actually to exceed one hundred persons per day on some days; yet after a little cool weather in the 9th month, the disorder took another type, and was not so mortal; which gave hopes, that a change usually expected in the temperature of our air, with heavy rains, before or about the time of the equinox, would bring us a providential relief; but these rains and this change were looked for in vain for six weeks after their usual time of coming, and we were left under the affliction till about the 24th of last month, when it pleased Divine Providence, who permitted the affliction, to give it a check, without much apparent change in our atmosphere; from that time the number of deaths rapidly decreased, and of convalescents increased; and some rains and cool weather, which have succeeded, seem to have nearly, if not altogether, eradicated it; as we have heard of no new cases for many days past, and most of those who had it before, are recovered and recovering, though from the violence of the remedies recommended by several of the physicians, and most generally adopted, many are left in a very weak state, which will require time to restore them to former strength.—This calamity, we conceive, has been nearly if not quite as fatal in proportion to the numbers as the plague in London in 1665; for if we compute that thirty thousand persons remained in town, and that of these about four thousand died, which, when the accounts are all collected, we believe will be near the matter, it will approach to one seventh of the whole in about three months, which is nearly equal to the proportion who died in London in a whole year. Among these we have to deplore the loss of very many of our most valuable citizens.

Our several families have abundant cause of thankfulness for merciful preservation through this calamity for although we have lost some, it is with satisfaction we can inform, that except our brother-in-law *S. Lewis* (who having lately married our sister, had not gone to house-keeping) all the heads of our families have been preserved.—Our brother *Thomas* having nothing to detain him in town, early retired to his country seat, about five miles distant, with all his family, but two servants left to take care of his house; one of whom was taken, the rest of the family are preserved. Our sister *Gilpin* and daughter remained in town, and with all their servants had the disorder, but are preserved through it; her two sons went to the country, and are well. Our *S. R. F.* in whose house our business is conducted, remained with his family for some time in town; on the 10th of the 9th month, *Henry Shaw*, a faithful warehousman, who had lived many years with us, was taken with the disorder, and died on the eighth day following; he was attended by two Africans, in whom we could confide; otherwise from the violence with which he was seized, he would probably have fallen on the third or fifth day.—On the 19th of the same month, *Sarah Rodman*, sister of our *S. R. F.*'s wife, and who had accompanied them from New-England, (a young woman, of whom, if this was a proper occasion to give her character, we could say every thing that could interest the tender feelings) was taken with the disorder, and soon seemed sensible of her approaching dissolution, for which she was prepared; she was attended by her and our sister till the eighth day of her sickness, when she expired, we are firmly persuaded, to awake in a state of rest.—A few days afterwards, say on the 11th of 10th month, our *S. R. F.* and wife, with our sister *Lewis*, and some of their servants, retired with the full concurrence of our *M. F.* to his country seat distant about four miles—where they have hitherto been preserved in health, and no accident has happened in his

town house. The disorder appeared in a servant of our *M. F.* on the 18th, and in his son *Jabez* on the 19th of the 9th month—they were both seized violently, and were treated according to the mode which the physicians at that time prescribed; were nursed with all the care that the nature of the disease would admit—The son, whom our *M. F.* visited every day, was taken off on the fifth—The servant on the seventh day from his being taken, was so ill as to be given over, and left by the physicians who attended him; yet not being deserted by his nurse, he recovered, and is now in perfect health—the disorder spread in his household until twelve of them had it, himself and wife, with several of their children included; all of whom, except one female servant, did well, and seven of them had it very lightly compared with some others. The heads of this family did not desert each other, or their children, or servants, but nursed them, except in the first instances, as if the disorder was not infectious; and they have the satisfaction to believe, that their care and attention was blessed to their dependents as well as to themselves, and that their risk was not much increased by it—we leave to the learned to trace the cause of this pestilence, some of whom insist it was imported, others that it was generated here by a long hot, dry summer: we take it to be the putrid bilious fever of the tropical climates, remembered here by elderly people twice under the name of the yellow fever, and during the late war once by the name of the camp fever; when it did not spread much among the inhabitants, but was confined principally to the soldiers. Our *M. F.* had it in the year 1778 in Virginia; and recognizing the symptoms has, since his late illness, had recourse to the letters he then wrote to his family, and finds it described exactly as he experienced on the present occasion; so that there is no doubt, in his mind, of its being the same disease; our private opinion is, that it was imported here from the West-Indies, but was much more general, and spread more rapidly, owing to the season, which had disposed our bodies to receive infections of any kind.—It is enough however for us to know, that the means of humbling a people, are abundant in the hands of the arbiter of nations, and that we believe this was a judgment on a highly favored city, for its many excesses; yet mixed with mercy; and we hope it may have the effect intended on our lives and conversations.

The physicians are all agreed, that the infectious disorder is no more in the city, and the citizens are rapidly returning; our clerks have been absent during the disease, and but two have returned; our *S. R. F.* has gone for a few days to accompany some friends on a religious visit, but we expect in the course of a week to be collected, and get to business, though the season is far advanced, and we fear we shall not be able to make sales of the large assortment of goods, which have arrived this season, and are now landing.

We have thus endeavoured to give you some idea of the situation, this city, and ourselves in particular have been in; and we doubt not you will readily excuse the deficiencies in our correspondence, which indeed must continue as to our foreign friends in general for some time longer, as it will require our whole diligence and attention to the sales of our goods, and collecting our debts, that we may be enabled to keep up our credit with them after so great a calamity.

We are, respectful friends,

Note. Those of our friends, who have no personal knowledge of our families, will excuse the particular mention of the circumstances attending them: we did not wish to obtrude our private distresses on their notice; but as we are known to a great majority of those, to whom this circular will be addressed, we thought it improper to omit what many might wish to hear concerning us.

Such of our country friends who want goods to supply their customers, may, in our opinion, come to town with perfect safety, or their orders will be attended to as usual.

Our several families have abundant cause of thankfulness for merciful preservation through this calamity for although we have lost some, it is with satisfaction we can inform, that except our brother-in-law & *James* (who having lately married our sister, had not gone to house-keeping) all the heads of our families have been preserved—Our brother *Yves* having nothing to detain him in town, early retired to his country seat, about three miles distant, with all his family, but two servants left to take care of his house; one of whom was taken, the rest of the family are preserved. Our sister *Gwyn* and daughter remained in town, and with all their servants had the disorder, but are preserved through it; her two sons went to the country, and are well. Our *S. R. F.* in whose house our business is conducted, remained with his family for some time in town; on the 10th of the 9th month, *Mary Gwyn*, a faithful watchwoman, who had lived many years with us, was taken with the disorder, and died on the eighth day following; he was attended by two physicians, in whom we could confide; otherwise from the violence with which he was seized, he would probably have fallen on the third or fifth day—On the 10th of the same month, *Jabez Gwyn*, sister of our *S. R. F.*'s wife, and who had accompanied them from New-England, (a young woman, of whom it was a proper occasion to give her character, we could say every thing that could interest the tender feelings) was taken with the disorder, and soon seemed sensible of her approaching dissolution, for which she was prepared; she was attended by her mother and our sister till the eighth day of her sickness, when she expired, we are firmly persuaded, to awake in a state of rest—A few days afterwards, (on the 11th of the month) our *S. R. F.* and wife, with our sister *Anna*, and some of their servants, retired with the full concurrence of our *S. R. F.* to his country seat distant about four miles—where they have hitherto been preserved in health, and no accident has happened in the

valuable citizens. Our several families have abundant cause of thankfulness for merciful preservation through this calamity for although we have lost some, it is with satisfaction we can inform, that except our brother-in-law & *James* (who having lately married our sister, had not gone to house-keeping) all the heads of our families have been preserved—Our brother *Yves* having nothing to detain him in town, early retired to his country seat, about three miles distant, with all his family, but two servants left to take care of his house; one of whom was taken, the rest of the family are preserved. Our sister *Gwyn* and daughter remained in town, and with all their servants had the disorder, but are preserved through it; her two sons went to the country, and are well. Our *S. R. F.* in whose house our business is conducted, remained with his family for some time in town; on the 10th of the 9th month, *Mary Gwyn*, a faithful watchwoman, who had lived many years with us, was taken with the disorder, and died on the eighth day following; he was attended by two physicians, in whom we could confide; otherwise from the violence with which he was seized, he would probably have fallen on the third or fifth day—On the 10th of the same month, *Jabez Gwyn*, sister of our *S. R. F.*'s wife, and who had accompanied them from New-England, (a young woman, of whom it was a proper occasion to give her character, we could say every thing that could interest the tender feelings) was taken with the disorder, and soon seemed sensible of her approaching dissolution, for which she was prepared; she was attended by her mother and our sister till the eighth day of her sickness, when she expired, we are firmly persuaded, to awake in a state of rest—A few days afterwards, (on the 11th of the month) our *S. R. F.* and wife, with our sister *Anna*, and some of their servants, retired with the full concurrence of our *S. R. F.* to his country seat distant about four miles—where they have hitherto been preserved in health, and no accident has happened in the

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to their correspondents

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Nicholas Ridgely Esquire

Dover

